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Suggestions on the Problem of Cleaning the Streets of Chicago

WRITTEN FOR THE

CITY HOMES ASSOCIATION

BY

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[The physical conditions of life in Chicago can never be satisfactory until the streets of the City are properly cared for. In order to lay the foundation for an intelligent opinion as to the possible solution of the vexed problem of street cleaning, the Executive Committee of the City Homes Association asked Mr. Harry G. Selfridge to prepare a paper setting forth the results of his own study and practical experience. Mr. Selfridge, as is well known, was active a few years ago in an effort to improve the street cleaning facilities and service of Chicago. His work at that time and his continued interest in the subject commended him to the Association as one fitted to speak with the authority of an expert. Mr. Selfridge disclaims this special qualification, but has complied with the request by writing the following monograph. It is published by the City Homes Association, and distributed with the Report upon Tenement Conditions, in the hope that it may add an impulse to the agitation for municipal cleanliness and healthfulness.]

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To the President of the City Homes Association:

In response to a request from you to prepare a paper upon "*The cleaning of the streets and alleys of Chicago,*" I have gathered together some data, and a few suggestions, which are given below. I see no reason why I should be better informed upon this subject than any member of your Association, except, possibly, that for six months in 1895 a committee with which I was connected undertook, with the consent of the city authorities, to keep clean the fourteen miles of streets and seven miles of alleys in the business center of the city; during that period we learned something of the practical work of this kind, and with your permission I will allow that brief experience to act now as the apology for attempting to offer any suggestions.

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"Cleanliness" is one of the most attractive features of any city, of any building, of any home—clean air, clean streets, and pure water, are qualities which at once count many points in favor of any village, town, or city, just as clean floors and clean linen go far toward constituting good housekeeping—while the absence of any or all of these qualities, either in the city or in the home, causes criticism which many other good qualities fail to overcome.

The stranger who visits that city whose air is impure, and whose highways are filthy, instinctively looks through prejudiced eyes, and all else, which may be beautiful and attractive, is less charming to him because of the natural prejudice thus formed: and that city which must continually apologize to its people and to its visitors because of filthy streets is handicapped to a very serious degree.

Street-cleaning in a large city is *not* a difficult problem, it is simply "*house-cleaning by the mile,*" coupled with "*everlastingly keeping at it*"; it requires an organization formed on a business basis, to which must be added constant attention and a reasonable sum of money, which shall be *intelligently* spent.

That little town in Holland (Broek) which boasts of being the "Cleanest city in the world," has won for itself, by means of this

enviable title, sufficient renown to attract the attention of and a visit from nearly all tourists who pass within a reasonable distance of its charming influence.

We can recall the New York of ten or a dozen years ago, with its dirty and poorly paved streets, and compare it now with the same streets—many of them splendidly paved with asphalt (which as a street service permitting the greatest cleanliness is easily the best of all pavements)—practically all of which streets are kept well cleaned. New York has made wonderful strides toward leadership during these last ten years. She is far and away the metropolis of the United States, but her chief attractiveness has for its foundation stone the *well paved, cleanly kept streets*—and to prove this let us imagine the New York of to-day, but with the rough, noisy, dirty streets of ten years ago, and how much of the attractiveness would vanish; how much less would its hotels be filled with money-spending visitors; how much less pride would its citizens have in their city, and how many less would be attracted to that city to make it their home!

Now if we couple this condition of dirty streets with an atmosphere surcharged with greasy soot—an atmosphere which forces its acquaintance upon one, and always leaves its soot-begrimed card—we can readily imagine such a New York as far from an ideal dwelling place or visitors' haven. Stately buildings would hardly overcome these obstacles, other pleasing features would be too seriously handicapped to survive, and much of the charm would be gone.

Chicago is really in quite such a position to-day. Its many handsome buildings, its beautiful (if clean) drives, and its attractive features are so handicapped by the dirt in the streets, and the soot in the atmosphere, that it actually requires a standing apology from each of its citizens. Can these handicaps be removed? *They certainly can*, if the citizens of this city decide to remove them, and are willing to work to that end, and to pay the cost of the same.

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Let us examine the expense account of the New York Street Cleaning Department. The last report I have been able to obtain states that in that portion of Greater New York included in Manhattan Island and the borough of Bronx—in which there are 552 miles of paved and 232 miles of unpaved streets and no alleys—there was expended during twelve months for street cleaning, and

for the removal of garbage, street sweepings, snow and ice, about $3,300,000, and this amount in detail is made up as below:

Administration	$ 200,000
Sweeping	1,300,000
Carting	900,000
Final disposition (such as dumping in ocean, etc.)	525,000
Rents, etc	95,000
Removing snow and ice	280,000
Total	$3,300,000

And if this is as cheaply as it can be done, it is worth all that it costs. In the above and following tables round figures are used. I have no data as to the share of the above amount expended on street cleaning alone, but I may add that the appropriation for 1901 for the above district is $3,482,000, and for the entire city of Greater New York it is $4,961,000.

Greater New York contains:

Of paved streets	1,737 miles
Of unpaved streets	770 "
Total	2,507 "

and no alleys.

As noted above, its appropriations for 1901 for street cleaning and garbage removal is nearly $5,000,000.

Chicago contains:

Of paved streets	1,205 miles
Of unpaved streets	1,584 "
Of paved alleys	118 "
Of unpaved alleys	1,244 "
Total	4,151 "

And this city's expenditures for 1900 were:

For street cleaning	$360,694
For garbage removal	441,391
Total	$802,085

Thus we see that *Chicago, with 65 per cent more miles of streets and alleys, expends for keeping clean only one-sixth the amount used by New York*, or placed upon the same basis which New York is on,

and assuming that both cities cleaned their unpaved streets, this city would require over $8,000,000 per annum for street cleaning and garbage removal. This statement is of no value except for comparison, unless to show that New York is paying well for being the cleanest large city on this continent, and one of the cleanest in the world. Chicago's streets would respond just as quickly to the broom. Our soil is not to blame. Our streets, though level, and often ill-paved, are not to blame. The physical conditions, although far from ideal, are not to blame. The reason this city is dirty is because the necessary amount of money is not appropriated and expended; and in my judgment the appropriation for *keeping clean is perhaps the very most important item of the whole city budget.*

For the purpose of making estimates, may I give an illustration or two? For example: Let us take the amount paid by the South Park Commissioners for cleaning the 41¾ miles of improved streets under their charge.

For the year ending November 30, 1900, this board expended $42,913, or $1,027 per mile. This, too, is worth all it costs. This cost includes the washing and squeegeeing of Jackson Street from end to end every night when not prevented by frost. It also includes the carting away of much surface dirt from macadam streets, which in wet weather wear down rapidly.

The board does not attempt to keep any of the streets clear of snow except Jackson Street and the north end of Michigan avenue, and when there is sufficient snow for sleighing this even is not done.

One more illustration of the cost of cleaning streets in Chicago:

The committee heretofore referred to cleaned, for the period from May 1st until November 3rd, 1895, the fourteen miles of streets and seven miles of alleys occupying the three-quarters of a mile square in the very busiest center of the city, and were obliged to do it all by hand, as they had neither money nor sufficient permanency to buy sweeping plants. This committee also raised by subscription the money to pay its bills, and of this amount, viz., $27,000, about 10 per cent was required for office rent, secretary's and collector's salaries, printing, etc. With the $24,000 remaining, the committee cleaned, by hand, every foot of street and alley surface from two to ten times every day except Sundays. It was necessary to pay $3.50 per day for wagons to haul away the sweepings, and all debris had to be carted to the north side dumping-

grounds, thus permitting only three, or very rarely four, loads a day for each wagon. Now, twenty-one miles of streets and alleys cleaned every day for six months—150 days—means 3,150 miles of streets and alleys cleaned; and this at a cost of $24,000 means $7.60 per mile, for work done by hand, and not at all in the most economical manner, but in an absolutely honest manner, and with an organization conducted on strict business rules. All sweepers received $1.50 per day, and no man's job depended upon any one's recommendation, but solely upon his ability to work hard, earnestly, and as intelligently as he could, all day. No man's letter could reinstate a man once discharged, and no workman was discharged except for cause. The men wore jean uniforms and caps (paid for from the $24,000). Every man was given the best of brooms, and from every man was expected, always, *his best.*

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So much for this experiment during the months which saw no snow. The cleaning of streets during the winter is a very different problem—not a difficult problem to solve, but one requiring more money, and never possible to work out so satisfactorily.

In one night we may have a fall of snow the removal of which alone would cost $100,000—indeed New York has spent sums approaching this figure more than once to remove the result of one snowstorm—and when we see the streets of the down-town portion of this city of Chicago fairly well cleaned, as we have this last winter, and at a large cost, and then see another snowstorm follow immediately, the effect is at least chilling.

The fable of the wager between the sun and the wind as to their respective ability to remove the traveler's coat is beautifully illustrated in the cleaning of streets after a heavy fall of wet snow. The cleaner works and picks and shovels, and the teamster hauls load after load with but slight effect upon miles of snow, ice, and slush, while the warm sun in one hour will do more toward removing the snow than thousands of laborers could accomplish in the entire day.

It must, therefore, be taken for granted that except for the down-town district, or at crossings, or in certain other parts of the city, the general, immediate, or complete cleaning up and carting away of the snow cannot be undertaken or expected until this city has several millions which can be appropriated for street cleaning.

Records show, however, that there are only about from twenty-

seven to thirty days each year in which snowstorms visit this city, and many of those are very light—from one-tenth of an inch upward, while such heavy falls as that of last February are of rare occurrence.

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We all know that the most frequented parts of the house, the store, or the city, require the most frequent cleaning, so it becomes possible to divide the streets and alleys of Chicago in classes and to devote attention to each class in proportion to the traffic upon its streets.

The proportion between paved and unpaved streets is constantly changing as new streets and alleys are being paved; furthermore a number of miles are under control of the park boards; but let us assume that there are in Chicago 1,200 miles of streets and 100 miles of alleys, which must be cleaned with more or less frequency. The unpaved streets cannot well be made attractive, and until the paved portion is cared for may, perhaps, require no great attention.

Of these 1,300 miles, I estimate:

10% should be cleaned once or more each week-day, making for year total of	40,560	miles
10% should be cleaned three times each week, making for year	20,280	"
10% should be cleaned twice each week, making for year total of	13,520	"
10% should be cleaned once each week, making for year total of	6,760	"
30% should be cleaned every two weeks, making for year total of	10,140	"
30% should be cleaned every month, making for year total of	4,680	"
Total	95,940	"

And while such a division might not give everything which would be desired, it would seem to take care fairly well of this city's wants at a cost which, with present revenues, would not be prohibitory. I have gone over the streets in detail and could itemize the above to a degree which would be tiresome to read, and not necessary for this paper.

Now the organization which would clean during the year 96,000

miles of streets, could be formed without difficulty, if permitted to be conducted on absolutely business principles, and civil service rules could be applied to such an organization without trouble—the great requirement being that the managers should obtain from every portion of the organization good and sufficient labor during every day employed. The work could, of course, be more effective if the organization could be permanent, so that money-saving plants could be owned by the organization—furthermore, permanency would insure a continuance of an established policy, as opposed to a continual change in policy—all of which is important to success with economy.

Allowing the expense of the South Park Board to guide us, we find that to clean the 1,300 miles of streets and alleys from once or oftener a day to once a month (dependent upon sweeping when necessary), would cost about $318,000, or figured on the basis of the work done by the committee in 1895, at $7.60 per mile, the work would cost $729,000.

It is probable that the first estimate is far too low, as many of the park driveways are used in a way to make expensive and frequent sweeping unnecessary. The second estimate would be nearer right except for the cost of removing snow from the down-town district. In considering the amount ($7.60) expended by the committee in 1895 we must recognize, however, that in the entire city the paved alleys are but one-tenth of the whole, while in the down-town section the alleys are one-third of the whole, and the alleys are cheaper to sweep than streets. Therefore, all things considered, I estimate that the paved portion of the city should be kept clean, and the snow fairly well removed from the down-town sections, the street crossings throughout the city, etc., for the sum of $800,000 for the year, to which should be added $50,000 for the purchase of the necessary street-sweeping machinery, horses, and up-to-date tools—a total of $850,000, and it is quite possible that of such an appropriation all need not be spent.

May I say that the work done by the city street cleaning department should always fairly be coupled with the *amount of money* which it has to work with. No street cleaning organization in the world can keep the streets of this great city as clean as they should be upon the small sum now appropriated for the purpose—and this city is especially *great in area*—an unfortunate and exceedingly expensive point in which to excel.

The "Clean City" ordinance recently passed by the Council is wise and meritorious, and only needs *living up to* to relieve our streets of much of the dirt and debris which is continually being thrown upon them.

* * * * * * *

If our City Council will but act as a "committee of the whole" on the subject of *making this a clean city*, and will devote as many hours and evenings as is necessary to thoroughly threshing the matter out—if each alderman will consider the question from the standpoint of the entire city's good, and not from that of his ward only, if this committee of the whole will determine that those methods must be adopted which will produce cleanliness at the least cost, and will appropriate a sufficient sum to pay for the work, even to the extent of cutting down any or all other items in the budget, if it will then appoint a committee, the members of which take a personal pride and put enthusiasm into the work, and who will give it enough time to *know every day* that it is being done well—if the Council will do this the whole city will rise and praise the act, every citizen's respect will increase for his city, and Chicago will be able to rub out the mud stain which has so long been upon its name.

Cleanliness dignifies, refines, and increases respect. Filth marks down whatever it is connected with. The growing children of the city instinctively take on the condition of the city. *Cleanliness in the city grows into the life and character of the child* and he recognizes its importance. Children always surrounded with filth grow accustomed to it and fail to realize its iniquitous contamination. Children brought up in a clean city will, I believe, show this bringing up in later years and will repay by loyalty, interest, and affection all that that cleanliness may cost.

The people of this city are crying for cleanliness more than for any other one thing. Many public matters require attention and the city's income is far too small to meet all calls, but *cleanliness at any cost* we should have. *Cleanliness first*, any and all other requirements afterward. *This city can be clean* if the citizens through their Council say the word.

And why should we not be a clean city? It is vital to our prestige, to our comfort, almost to our happiness, and certainly vital to our self-respect as a community.*

HARRY G. SELFRIDGE.

*NOTE: This paper was written in March, 1901, and before the present interest in "cleaning the city streets" had manifested itself. It is to be sincerely hoped that this interest will grow stronger and will not be allowed to die out.